

Clashing over contra issue

CIA, State vie for control

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Washington

Against a backdrop of deepening scandal, a longstanding struggle within the Reagan administration over control of the United States' contra policy and the future of the Nicaraguan rebel movement's leadership is intensifying.

This struggle pits the US Central Intelligence Agency and its director, William Casey, against the State Department and its chief, George Shultz, and his influential assistant secretary for Latin America affairs, Elliot Abrams, according to ranking Republican and Democratic congressional staff and high-level contra sources.

What essentially began as a bureaucratic battle for turf, these sources say, escalated as Mr. Abrams began to favor contra reform and the removal of CIA-backed contra leaders Adolfo Calero and Enrique Bermudez. As new "contragate" charges appear daily, these sources say, the clash is fast becoming a bitter fight in which the top figures involved are struggling to retain their own jobs while attempting to manipulate the emerging twists and turns of the scandal to unseat their enemies.

At the heart of this controversy, but for now forgotten, are basic questions about what should be the nature of any contra movement that survives the current storm.

Recent charges that the oil-rich Sultanate of Brunei contributed funds to the contras were leaked to the press by CIA sources, say key Republican and Democratic Senate aides. This was done, they say, with the aim of spreading the taint of the Iran affair to the State Department (until now untouched by it) and specifically to discredit, and perhaps topple, Abrams.

The Brunei accusations could have serious ramifications, because, as one ranking Republican aide said, "there is no way that the administration can show that Brunei money went only for legal humanitarian aid, and not also arms." According to US law, if the Brunei money went into some type of CIA or US government bank account, in Switzerland or elsewhere, then the disbursement of such funds to buy arms for the contras would have been illegal.

The Brunei charges might only be the tip of the iceberg, say Democratic and Republican aides close to current investigations of the Iran affair and ongoing investigations of the contras that predate the recent scandal over the alleged transfer of funds from the Iran arms sales to the contras. They assert that other countries gave even larger sums of money to the contras, some of which might have been used to buy arms, and that such allegations will be made public shortly. Taiwan and South Korea are most often mentioned. One congressional aide said Abrams's enemies who leaked the story did so merely as a "trial balloon" for future allegations about the involvement of other countries.

Another key Republican staff member stated, "It looks now like the contra accounts might have had a lot of money from a lot of countries put into them. The question everybody is asking themselves now is: Where did this money go to? Most of it did not end up in the field with the contras. People are beginning to believe that there was a lot of corruption involved."

Some congressional sources involved in investigations into possible contra corruption say members of the private US contra support network organized by Lt. Col. Oliver North and headed by figures such as retired Maj. Gen. Richard Secord, as well as the contra leadership, could be implicated. They also believe that Mr. Secord's alleged connection to former CIA operatives working with Libya's Col. Muammar Qaddafi might prove embarrassing to the Reagan administration.

"By the time this is over," said one Republican congressional aide in Central American affairs, "most officials who had anything to do with Central American policy will be has-beens. The revelations will come one after another, and even though no serious charges of corruption or even direct illegalities may be made against top administration officials themselves, such a cloud of doubt will have been raised that a whole series of resignations will have to follow."

The departure of former national security adviser, Vice-Adm. John Poindexter, and Colonel North toppled the CIA's main bureaucratic opponents centered in the National Security Council. These opponents of the CIA's policy were allied with some key figures active in Central American affairs in the Pentagon. But, most analysts say, North's battle with the CIA was more over control than over issues. Although Abrams's influence has grown in the last year, it is only since the eclipsing of the NSC's influence that the State Department has emerged as the CIA's main bureaucratic opponent.

In addition to turf struggles, the State Department believes that the only way to keep the contra movement alive is to change it radically. It is critical of the CIA for attempting to maintain too tight control over the contra military movement and preventing the emergence of an authentic national contra leadership that could have had a wide-base political support in Nicaragua.

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The CIA's main concern is that there will be new hearings that might eventually lead to new congressional oversights and restrictions of their activities.

The possible resignations that most concern the State Department and the CIA are those of much of the leadership of the Honduran-based Nicaraguan Democratic Front (FDN), the main military arm of the contra movement. Particularly singled out by Abrams and others who have taken up the cause of contra reform are FDN civilian chief Adolfo Calero and the FDN's leading military officer, Mr. Bermudez, according to ranking contra and congressional sources.

Bermudez is especially controversial because of past association with deposed Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle. Mr. Calero is seen by critics within Congress and in the Nicaraguan exile community, as too closely linked to Somocistas and the old-line oligarchy.

According to high-level contra sources and ranking congressional aides from both parties, the main issue behind the calls for Calero and Bermudez's resignations are not whether they did or did not know of the contra funds. Calls for their ouster stem from the charge that under their leadership the contra movement has not established a real political base in Nicaragua. In addition, the contra movement has been tarred by public allegations of corruption and drug running.

According to one Republican staff member, the real reason the State Department is pressing for Calero's ouster is that it realizes that Congress will not approve many more funds for the rebels unless it is presented with the image of a completely new contra movement.

Both high-level contra sources and congressional staff members close to the situation believe it unlikely that the

contras will be able to stage any military upsets in the field against the Sandinistas within the next year or so. Thus, say many contra strategists and some of their congressional allies, in order for the contra movement to get further congressional funding or survive at all, a basic change of tactics will be necessary.

As one congressional ally of the contras charges, "Till now, the contras have essentially had a leadership implanted from the outside, largely by the CIA, and the agency [the CIA] has been very preoccupied with how closely people follow orders and has made very sure that no leadership not loyal to its directions emerged."

But many US and Nicaraguan analysts close to the contra movement say it is not clear where this new leadership will come from, especially in the next year or so - in time to persuade Congress to continue funding. Some moderate contras mention younger political and military cadres not strongly affiliated with the CIA, the oligarchy, or the Somocistas waiting to take over. But many congressional analysts close to the contras do not see many people like that waiting in the wings - especially with real political, administrative, and military talent - who could both command the loyalty of their troops as well as convince Nicaraguans that they represent a real socially progressive alternative to the Sandinistas.

According to many analysts, if the contras do survive, it will not be with their current military strategy. Hopes of gaining a swift military victory over the Sandinistas, never very realistic, are now shattered. Instead, the contras will have to change tactics.



Casey: State Department critical of CIA's handling of contras

Battalion-size units good for conventional military struggle will probably be abandoned in favor of long-term guerrilla warfare. The model is El Salvador's leftist guerrillas. And the time span for a Sandinista overthrow, according to many analysts, is 5 or 10 years rather than 1 or 2. This means the contras would need long-term funding from the US Congress, though at lower amounts.

But for the moment, sources close to Calero say that he is prepared to resist strongly any attempts at his ouster. One weapon he might have is the possession of information, disclosure of which could prove embarrassing to the Reagan administration. One compromise solution could be the substitution of the entire top contra leadership, including Calero's rival, Arturo Cruz.